THE EDUCATION AND MEDICAL PRACTICE OF DR. JAMES MCCUNE SMITH (1813-1865), FIRST BLACK AMERICAN TO HOLD A MEDICAL DEGREE

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James McCune Smith (1813-1865)—first black American to obtain a medical degree, prominent abolitionist and suffragist, compassionate physician, prolific writer, and public intellectual—has been relatively neglected by historians of medicine. No biography of Smith exists to this day, though he has been the subject of several essays. Born, in his own words, "the son of a self-emancipated bond-woman," and denied admission to colleges in the United States, his native land, Smith earned medical, master's, and baccalaureate degrees at Glasgow University in Scotland. On his return to New York City in 1837, Smith became the first black physician to publish articles in US medical journals.

Smith was broadly involved in the anti-slavery and suffrage movements, contributing to and editing abolitionist newspapers and serving as an officer of many organizations for the improvement of social conditions in the black community. In his scientific writings Smith debunked the racial theories in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, refuted phrenology and homeopathy, and responded with a forceful statistical critique to the racially biased US Census of 1840.

Frederick Douglass, Gerrit Smith, and John Brown personally collaborated with James McCune Smith in the fight for black freedom. As the learned physician-scholar of the abolition movement, Smith was instrumental in making the overthrow of slavery credible and successful. (*J Natl Med Assoc.* 2003;95:603-613.)

Key words: James McCune Smith ♦ medical history ♦ black doctor ♦ suffrage

In 1837, James McCune Smith sailed home to his native New York with a medical degree from Glasgow University, becoming the first university-trained black American physician. He returned to a hero's welcome in New York's black intellectual and abolitionist community. Ransom F. Wake, a former master of the African Free School that Smith attended as a boy, offered his protégé the following blessing at the homecoming reception: "May the hand of time press lightly on your brow," said Wake, "and long may you live to be an ornament for your country, an advocate for the oppressed, a scourge for the oppressor, and a benefactor to mankind."

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Smith lived up to all of Wake's expectations, but time did not press lightly on him—he has essentially been forgotten. Although most historians of black culture know about Smith, historians of medicine have neglected him. Only a few articles about Smith have ever been written for a medical readership.[1-3] Most physicians would not even recognize his name.

As a leader of the black intelligentsia in 19th-century New York City, Smith's life provides a glimpse into an early society of black scholars. Many non-historians assume that black culture was universally impoverished, both materially and academically, during this period. It is important to know the life of Smith the physician-intellectual because he so eloquently and gracefully, in words and actions, undermined such assumptions.

Previous historians have revealed many of the major details about Smith, though none has focused on his medical education and career. Smith's role in the abolition movement has received the bulk of attention from historians,[4-8] and interested readers are directed to those works. The present paper attempts to collate the important details about Smith's development as a physician, beginning with his early education. The principal aim of this paper is to introduce the medical profession to Smith's remarkable experience as the first black American to earn the title "doctor of medicine," and to provide enough historical detail to understand the context in which Smith lived.

JEFFERSON'S UNFORTUNATE MUSINGS ON RACE

"I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind," wrote Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia.*"[9] No single quotation better captures the prejudicial beliefs of educated whites in the late 18th century, most of whom shared Jefferson's "suspicion" that blacks were naturally inferior and relatively uneducable. An older Thomas Jefferson later recorded more mature thoughts on race in a letter dated August 30, 1791, addressed to the accomplished black inventor and almanac publisher, Benjamin Banneker, stating that, "Nobody wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren, talents equal to those of the other colors of men, and that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely to the degraded condition of their existence, both in Africa and America."[9]

The education of James McCune Smith for the profession of medicine occurred in the context of the quest for "such proofs" as Mr. Jefferson sought. In fact, at the peak of his medical career, Smith would refute, point-by-point, Jefferson's early ideas about mental and physical racial differences.[10] Smith perceived that demonstrating the intellectual equality of the races was critical for countering the pernicious argument that free blacks might languish or create mayhem without filial protection from white slave owners.[11]

The medical profession was an intellectual proving ground for 19th century blacks. Other African Americans had practiced medicine before and during Smith's lifetime, but only a few received medical degrees in antebellum America, and none before Smith.[2,12,13] A chronology of black pioneers in medicine helps to place Smith's accomplishments in context. The earliest recorded American black physician was James Derham, of New Orleans (b. 1762), apprenticeship-trained and based in Philadelphia, where he earned the professional esteem of Dr. Benjamin Rush. David J. Peck, graduating from Rush Medical College in 1847, became the first black man to receive an American medical degree, a decade after Smith. Reflecting 19th century society's parallel prejudices against blacks and women, it was not until 1864, a year before Smith's death, that Rebecca

Crumper Lee became the first African-American woman to earn a medical degree, from New England Female Medical College, which merged with Boston University in 1873.[14,15] Thus, Smith's New York medical peers were exclusively white, although later in his career he interacted often with fellow physician-abolitionist Dr. Martin R. Delaney, who attended lectures at Harvard Medical School but met with student protests and did not receive a degree.[16, 17]

FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE

James McCune Smith was born in the city of New York on April 18, 1813. Little is known about his family. Smith referred to himself as the son of a "self-emancipated bond-woman,"[18] but how she gained her freedom is unknown. Even if they were free, blacks in New York City (prior to their legal emancipation in 1827)[5] lived in fear of slave-hunters who raided homes in order to recapture fugitives. Smith remembered these days as marred by "constant apprehension and jeopardy."[19] We know Smith's father's name only from Glasgow University's Matriculation Album for 1832, which lists "James M'Cune Smith" as 'filius natu maximus Samuelis, Mercatoris apud New York' [first natural son of Samuel, merchant, New York].[20, 21] This is the only known reference to Smith's father.

Upon his return to America in 1837, Smith refers only to a singular "parent," his mother. In a letter to Rev. Orville Dewey, DD, Smith characterized himself as, "the son of a slave, owing my liberty to the emancipation act of the State of New York, and having kindred in a southern State; some of them slaveholders, others slaves...,"[22] indicating that some of his relatives may have been white Southerners.

EARLY EDUCATION OF DR. SMITH

Although his family background is obscure, some artifacts of Smith's childhood have been preserved in the New York Public Library's Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture[23,24] and the New York Historical Society,[25] which also has a collection of records from the Colored Orphan Asylum,[26,27] where Smith later would practice medicine when he was not working from his combined office and pharmacy at 55 West Broadway in New York City.[27,28]

The New York Manumission Society, a philanthropic organization founded in 1785, sponsored the African Free Schools that Smith would attend, the history of which was written by the school's headmaster, Charles C. Andrews,[29] who also vouchsafed the extant drawings, poetry, ciphering, and other schoolwork of his pupil James.[23-25] Andrews taught the students spelling, penmanship, grammar, geography, and astronomy, hiring other teachers at his own expense to cover natural philosophy and navigation.[19]

By age nine or younger, Smith was enrolled in African Free School No. 2 on Mulberry Street in New York City. The articulate, young student presented himself as a bright, obedient boy who made a good impression on adults.[29] Undoubtedly as a result, he was chosen at age 11 to make his first abolitionist speech, with the visiting Marquis de Lafayette in attendance. Revered by Americans for his role in the Revolutionary War, Lafayette was an influential ally in the struggle for emancipation of slaves. The text of the speech, written in Smith's hand and embellished with decorous calligraphy on a paper broadside, is stored in the Schomburg collection of the New York Public Library. The young Smith addressed General Lafayette with eloquence beyond his years, exclaiming "Here, Sir, you behold hundreds of poor children of Africa sharing with those of a lighter hue in the blessings of education; and, while it will be our great pleasure to remember the great deeds you have done for America, it will be our delight also to cherish the memory of General Lafayette as a friend to African emancipation and as a member of this institution."[24]

Smith was considered one of the brightest of an extraordinary roster of African Free School students that included future renowned Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge,[30] Rev. Alexander Crummell, MA, Oxon, Professor Charles L. Reason, Rev. Isaiah G. De Grasse, Henry Highland Garnet, and Rev. Peter Williams, Jr.[31] Given the disadvantaged origins and spectacular successes of its graduates, the African Free School provided powerful proof for New York abolitionists that the races were indeed equal in intellectual capacity, and that unfavorable social circumstances could be blamed for any existing differences in racial achievements.

There are gaps in the historical record during Smith's teenage years. Hints at hardscrabble experiences occur in Smith's recollections about his boyhood with Henry Highland Garnet, with whom he "...used to fight 'an Irish constituency' from Mulberry street school-house to the City Hall Park, sprinkling our young hot blood along the streets of New York."[32] Smith reportedly was described by a friend as having been "at a forge with the bellows handle in one hand and a Latin grammar in the other,"[33] and came under the continued tutelage of Protestant Episcopal clergy in New York, including the Rev. Joseph Curtis, Rev. Frederic Schroeder, and Rev. Peter Williams[28, 34] (who later would visit Smith at Glasgow University).[33] In spite of his prodigious scholastic talents, Smith was denied entry to medical school in Geneva, New York,[6,35] and Columbia University, solely because on his race.[36,37] Consequently, Smith's abolitionist benefactors drew upon international connections in Glasgow, where the Glasgow Emancipation Society was active, and traditions were liberal with respect to university admissions.[38]

Even before Smith sought admission to medical school, John Brown, a black medical practitioner in New York City, was refused admission to examinations by Dr. John Augustine Smith (1782-1865), president of the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons, unless he pledged in writing to expatriate himself to Liberia.[37, 39] New York may have been more progressive than the South, but its academic establishments were not prepared to accept that children of slaves could master the intricacies of medical practice and practice alongside white doctors.

EDUCATION IN GLASGOW, 1832-1837

The story of Smith's educational odyssey in Europe begins with his sea voyage from New York to Liverpool. His journey on the ship *Caledonia* commenced under a favorable wind on the morning of August 16, 1832. As he recorded in his private journal, Smith, then 19 years old, watched "those tall prim whitewashed light houses lessen in the distance," as the ship rounded Sandy Hook en route to open ocean. The journal that Smith kept during the trip survives only as excerpts reprinted in the *Colored American* newspaper. Smith's journal reads like an unfinished epic poem, revealing his poetical nature, solemn piety, and rich vocabulary. To my knowledge, the present paper is the first to reference the journal in its entirety.[40-48]

James Smith wrote of "the phosphoric gleam of our wake, and the deep, blue vault above, studded with bright stars," and as the ship neared Liverpool, he sees before him "the myriads of twinkling gas lights, which fancy may fling into a thousand beautiful forms."[43] When a seaman aboard the *Caledonia* was stricken by the symptoms of the endemic Asiatic cholera, James watched as the faces of the passengers "instantly blanched with fear." The patient "seemed a basilisk—it was impossible to avoid gazing upon him."[41] The other sailors surrounded the patient, dosing him with brandy and pepper and "chafing his limbs." James later prayed in his stateroom, restoring tranquility to his mind. Fortunately for everyone on board, the seaman recovered, and cholera was held in check.

Smith was acutely sensible of his exile. But

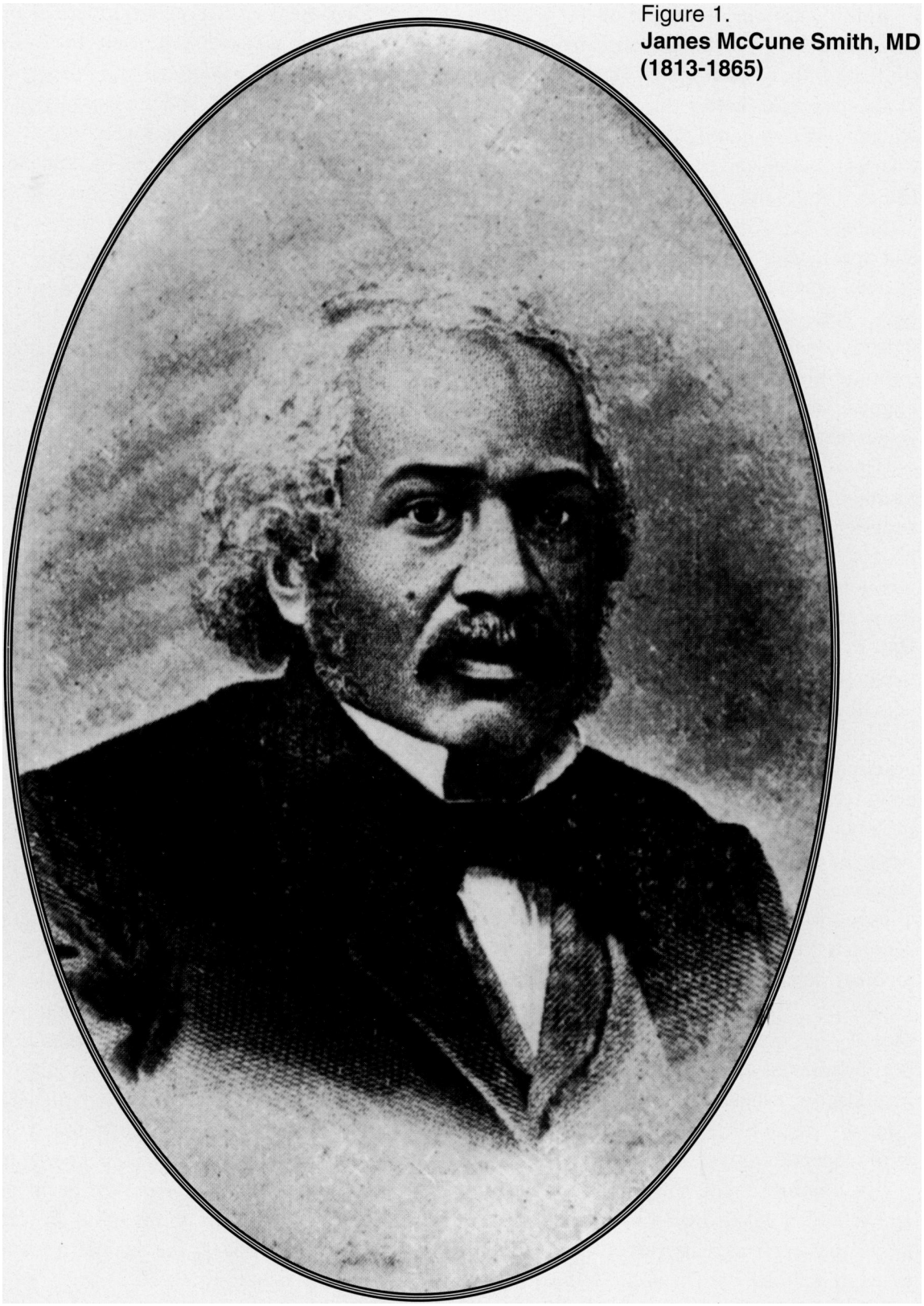

Figure 1.
James McCune Smith, MD (1813-1865)

he never rejected what he referred to as "My own, my native land," despite his exuberance to be a free man in the United Kingdom. When he disembarked from the *Caledonia*, and walked the length of the Liverpool wharf, the thought "I am free!" overtook him, and he wrote in his journal that, "I could embrace the soil on which I now live, since it yields not only to all who dwell, but to all who may come to it, a greater amount of rational liberty than is secured to man in any other portion of the globe."

When Smith arrived in Liverpool, he met with a friendly reception from members of the London Agency Anti-Slavery Society at the mansion of John Crawford, Esq., on the banks of the Mersey River.[44] Smith's arrival in Scotland narrowly preceded the July 29, 1833, Reform Parliament Bill abolishing slavery, passed at the instigation of William Wilberforce (1759-1833).[49] Before leaving by the steamer *Aliza Craig* to Glasgow on September 15, 1832, Smith called on Margaret Gill, the new, English wife of his former schoolmate and star Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge, who was then performing on stage in London, and they strolled together in Liverpool's garden cemetery, an interracial activity that would have been unthinkable in the United States at that time. Thus, it was in an atmosphere of relative racial tolerance that Smith began his five years in the United Kingdom.

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Smith received his BA (1835), MA (1836), and MD (1837) from the University of Glasgow.[21] There were 79 MD degrees awarded that year, and 22 CM (surgical) degrees.[21] James Watt, Joseph Black, Edmund Burke, and Adam Smith are among the famous faculty and alumni of Glasgow,[50] and the medical school retained its prestige in Smith's era.[51] The physician to the Glasgow Royal Infirmary from 1838-48 was Robert Perry, who made careful studies of differences between typhus and typhoid fevers.[52] The Hunterian Museum, transferred to Glasgow in 1807 and, containing specimens of geology and natural history, pictures and paintings, and a large collection of carefully prepared and mounted anatomical specimens,[52] would have been part of Smith's studies, particularly during his anatomy classes with Dr. James Jeffray, which required dissections. When Smith arrived in Glasgow, the Industrial Revolution was well underway, with all its attendant social and health problems. Accordingly, Smith gained extensive experience at the Lock Hospital (for treatment of venereal diseases).[53]

Some of the subjects that Smith would have studied and been examined on for the BA and MA degrees include: humanity ("the most interesting works of the best Latin writers"), Greek, logic, moral philosophy, mathematics, natural philosophy, practical astronomy, and natural history.[50] The medical requirements were: anatomy, chemistry, institutions of medicine, practice of medicine, materia medica, midwifery, surgery, botany, and an infirmary clerkship for 12 months, which probably would have been in the Royal Infirmary, with a capacity of 208 patients.[50] A two-hour oral "acquittal" before the faculty would be required in order to graduate, and Smith did so with honors.

Upon graduation, Smith ventured to Paris for additional clinical exposure before returning home to New York. After Smith was denied passage[54] by Captain Bigley, of the ship *Canonicus*, his anti-slavery colleagues John Murray and William Smeal in Glasgow rallied to his public defense,[55] and wrote Smith a heartfelt letter of consolation.[56]

PRACTICE AND HOME IN NEW YORK CITY

Smith practiced at 93 Chapel St., and made his home at 151 Reade St. (c.1839) and then 29 Leonard St. (c.1842).[57] His general medical and surgical practice was not confined to black patients, and offered various services including,

"bleeding, tooth-drawing, cupping, and leeching,"[58] as well as Shaker's Herbs from his drugstore.[58] In October 1839, Smith advertised an evening school in his home, in which he would teach spelling, reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography for a fee of $3 per quarter.[58] He delivered two lectures refuting phrenology in Philadelphia in the first year after his return from Glasgow.[33] However, even at the height of his career, he was not accepted into membership of any of the New York medical associations or the American Medical Association.[59]

During the early 1840s, Smith married Malvina Barnet,[33] who was reportedly a graduate of Rutgers Female Institute,[34] founded in 1839 for the education of women, and located at 5th Avenue and 42nd Street. The Smiths relocated to the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, and after Smith's death in 1865 his wife continued to live there (162 South 3rd St., and then 9 Marcy Ave.) until at least 1878, but not after 1883. Four of their children survived; his first born child, Amy, died on Christmas Eve, 1849, "after a year of ailment, at times painful and distressing,...which she bore with child-like patience," leaving Smith "stricken with grief."[60] Smith loved raising children, writing that "three little souls look up to me for support and discipline and guidance: what a holy trust!"[61]

COLORED ORPHAN ASYLUM

Smith cared for children throughout his career. He was physician to the Colored Orphan Asylum, at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 44th Street, which was founded in 1836 and destroyed by a white mob during the Draft Riots in New York City on July 13, 1863.[62] The children escaped, although some were nearly killed. One Irishman in the mob called out, "If there is a man among you with a heart within him, come and help those poor children," which prompted the mob to accost him. After that time, Smith kept more limited hours 9-10 a.m. and 3-7 p.m. at 15 North Moore Street.[62]

By 1863, the Colored Orphan Asylum had admitted 1310 children, and had 209 in residence that year, 196 of them requiring some kind of medical treatment.[63] The health of the children was precarious and Smith regularly administered vaccinations against smallpox (children had to show two vaccine marks to be admitted) and sought to reduce overcrowding and improve ventilation. Deaths were mostly attributed to measles, smallpox, and tuberculosis, with mortality averaging about one child in 20 per year.[64] Some of the children were in the orphanage because their parents had died, but most were abused, neglected, and abandoned. Parents of runaways only rarely reclaimed them.

Due to frequent serious outbreaks of measles and whooping-cough among the children, the directors of the Colored Orphan Asylum called for the gratuitous services of a physician in the by-laws of March 17, 1837, and they relied on volunteers for almost a decade. In December 1846, Smith was unanimously appointed physician to the Colored Orphan Asylum. The directors interceded on Smith's behalf when the rail company denied him passage on the streetcars due to his race. The 11th annual report states, "On information received that Dr. Smith is prohibited from riding in the 21st St. cart on account of his color and has been obliged to walk to and from the asylum a distance of 6 or 7 miles, almost daily of late in consequence of the measles breaking out in the institution, of which there have already been 50 cases, the managers agree to empower him to hire a conveyance at the expense of the asylum during the prevalence of the disease...and to apply to the Rail Road company on his behalf." The directors also agreed to pay Smith $100 per year for his services.

On one festive occasion, Dr. Wooster Beach allowed the use of his estate in Westchester, and Smith took all of the children out for some fresh air and recreation. Smith worked tirelessly for the benefit of the orphanage. On July 9, 1852, Smith presented the trustees with 5000 acres of land, given by his friend the wealthy abolitionist Gerrit

Smith, to be held in trust and later sold for the benefit of the orphans. Gerrit Smith was particularly concerned that the gift be used to assist the boys who had been indentured to work on farms.

FIRST CASE REPORTS BY A BLACK PHYSICIAN

On September 3, 1840, Smith authored the first case report ever to be written by a black physician in America, entitled, "Case of ptyalism with fatal termination." John Watson, MD, who consulted with Smith on the case, read it before the New York Medical and Surgical Society. Smith could not read it himself because the Society had asked him to withdraw his application, despite finding him qualified, "lest it might interfere with the 'harmony' of the young institution."[65] Dr. Watson, born in Ireland and graduated from NYU with a medical degree, was appointed surgeon of the New York Hospital in 1838, and rose to be the president of the New York Academy of Medicine until his death on June 3, 1863.[63] The substance of the case was that of a woman married for nine years with one child, who complained of recurrent pain in the "ileo-cecal region, generally at night, with great severity, and cramp of the lower extremities." Two weeks later, her tongue swelled so greatly that she was unable to speak.

Ptyalism refers to profuse salivation, and the patient attributed her salivation and tongue and gum swelling to pills (perhaps calomel – mercury chloride) prescribed by a Dr. Purdy. Smith wrote that her breath had a "mercurial foetor." Exposure to mercury is known to cause swelling of salivary glands, gingivitis, stomatitis, and GI distress,[66] indicating that her suffering may have been iatrogenic, at least in part. Her chief complaint, right ileo-cecal pain, may have represented appendicitis or ovarian pain. She had a "chronic hacking cough" and was in poor health for several years, making intestinal tuberculosis one speculative diagnostic possibility among many potential explanations for lower abdominal pain.

Whatever the patient's diagnosis may have been, Smith acted in accordance with usual practice of that era, emphasizing bleeding and evacuant therapies. Smith blistered the nape of her neck and applied an aqueous sulfur/copper/alum potion to the tongue. He also applied leeches to the submaxillary region, which reportedly improved her deglutition and reduced the swelling of her lips. At one point he gave her yet another powder containing mercury, exhibiting the unawareness characteristic of physicians in that era of iatrogenic harms. Watson was later consulted and made deep longitudinal scarifications on the dorsum of the tongue, which "bled freely for several hours," diminishing the size of the tongue. However, she died a couple of weeks later. Whatever the initial cause of her pain, it is clear that the best efforts of Smith and Watson were marginally helpful at best, and some were probably deleterious, but their difficulties with the case prompted them to report it to colleagues, reflecting a willingness to learn from unsuccessful medical efforts.

Smith's next report, a case series published in the *New York Journal of Medicine*,[53] would become the first medical scientific paper published by a black physician in America. Smith's paper was a well-written description of five cases of women who experienced cessation of menses coincident with the use of opium. Drawing on his experiences in the Lock Hospital, Glasgow, Smith had noted that discontinuation of opium tended to lead to return of regular menstrual cycles, which contradicted contemporary texts on the subject. Although the case series proved inconclusive, Smith speculated, "It may also be worth the inquiry, whether opium, in skillfully regulated doses, may not be used as a means to bear women safely through the critical disturbances which occur at the 'change of life'." Like any of his 19th century peers, Smith was bound by the limits of available medical knowledge.

In "Lay Puffery of Homeopathy,"[67] Smith

expressed his orthodox view of medicine by delivering a scathing statistical critique of claims made by William K. Lothrop that homeopathic treatments had led to a lower death rate among children in New York orphanages. Smith reexamined the records of the orphanages, revised erroneous figures, and reanalyzed the mortality statistics to include only those children who had been under continuous homeopathic treatment. In doing so, Smith exhibited an uncommonly well-developed sense of the importance of controlled comparison in medical research. Smith's relative statistical sophistication derived from his education in Glasgow, which coincided with early advances in quantitative public health developed by Adolphe Quetelet (1796-1874), Louis Rene Villerme (1782-1863), Edwin Chadwick (1800-1890), and William Farr (1807-1883),[68,69] all of whom influenced Smith.[70]

EQUALITY BY THE NUMBERS: SMITH THE STATISTICIAN

Homeopathy was neither the only nor the primary target of Smith's statistical acumen. Refuting racially biased statistics was his passion. Taking issue with the statement of Rev. Orville Dewey, that "Emancipation has taken place here, (in the free States), yet the blacks are worse off than the slaves of the South—not being so well clothed, fed or so happy," Smith constructed statistical tables showing that Northern blacks were in fact living longer, achieving scholastically on a par with whites, and attending church more, while suffering less frequently from insanity in comparison with their enslaved Southern counterparts.[22,71] John C. Calhoun, then US Secretary of State, derogated the idea of freedom for blacks on the grounds of the 1840 Census, citing the high insanity and mortality rates among free blacks. Smith responded with his most distinguished statistical research, "A Dissertation on the Influence of Climate on Longevity," which was published in *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*.[70]

Dr. Edward Jarvis, a Massachusetts abolitionist, was among those in the scientific community to believe that the 1840 Census was racially biased.[72] At the ceremony awarding the Boylston Prize to Jarvis in April 1845, Smith's article was presented to the Boylston Medical Committee of Harvard University. In his article, Smith debunked the fallacious use of higher mortality rates in the North to justify the institution of slavery, providing the advanced statistical insight that, without correction for age, annual mortality rates do not reflect longevity and, therefore, could not be used to compare the health of slaves with that of free blacks. In 1854, Smith was elected to the prestigious American Geographical Society in New York, giving an address on ways to improve census-taking methods. Reporting on his election, a newspaper article referred to Smith as a "colored savan."[73]

SMITH AND ABOLITIONIST POLITICS

Smith's early writings, "Destiny of the People of Color,"[74] "Freedom and Slavery for Africans,"[22] and "A lecture on the Haytien revolutions; with a sketch of the character of Toussaint L'Ouverture," propelled him into national abolitionist politics.[75] Later, he covered a wide range of issues in essays on the meaning of citizenship in the wake of the Dredd Scott decision,[76] immigration,[77] the conditions required for civilization,[78] and the importance of the game of chess.[65] He was involved at all levels in anti-slavery activities, staving off the Liberian Colonization Movement,[79] making a strong push for black and female suffrage,[80, 81] supporting the Mendi of the *Amistad* after their acquittal,[82] and proposing a mutual savings bank to elevate the social conditions of blacks.[83]

Smith served as a director of the Colored People's Educational Movement to the Memory of Abraham Lincoln.[84] In addition, Smith collaborated with Frederick Douglass, Gerrit Smith, and John Brown, and was valuable for his level-headed approach and scientific clout. Frederick

Douglass, firebrand narrator of the Anti-Slavery Movement, cited James McCune Smith as the single most important influence on his life,[85] and Smith was widely regarded as the most scholarly of all the abolitionists. Smith wrote a regular column in Douglass's paper under the pseudonym of "Communipaw," involving himself in progressively more radical political activity as he grew older,[86,87] but always insisting on rational behavior and seeking to prevent self-destructive violence by abolitionists. In particular, Smith sought to block retaliation against white slaveholders.[88] While keeping up a full medical practice, Smith still pulled with nearly as much force as any other abolitionist in the tug-of-war leading to the downfall of slavery in 1865, the year of his death. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to delve into full detail about Smith's political and civic life, but the interested reader is referred to two reference sources that deal extensively with Smith's political contributions.[5, 89]

DEATH AND LEGACY OF DR. SMITH

Smith's congestive heart failure prevented him from practicing much after 1863.[90] He died on November 17, 1865, according to the records of St. Phillip's Episcopal Church.[34] Despite his remarkable achievements, Smith's legacy remains obscure. His effectiveness in abolitionist politics ranks as his greatest historical contribution, and that is how most historians will represent him. Moreover, there is a growing awareness among professional historians of the role of the black intellectual in antebellum America, and by any standards Smith ranks as a leader of that community.[91] However, Smith has been overlooked for too long by historians of medicine.

Smith pioneered the use of medically based statistics as evidence against notions of racial inferiority. In spite of being denied entry to American medical schools and medical societies because of his race, Smith became a charitable doctor to black orphans, an accomplished statistician and medical author, and an effective social activist who worked with black and white abolitionists to end slavery. James McCune Smith truly embodied "such proofs" of "talents equal to those of the other colors of men" as sought by Thomas Jefferson and others in antebellum America who agreed in principle with abolition of slavery but clung to racist doubts about the ability of blacks to transition into free society. Although the living Dr. Smith debunked such doubts persuasively with his voice and his pen, the historical record of his life is ultimately his most forceful and enduring argument.

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